

Pentecost + 16
24/09/2006

Mark the Evangelist

Proverbs 31:10-31

Psalm 1

James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a

Mark 9:30-37

...On welcoming the child...

In the reading from Mark the second of Jesus' predictions of his way of the cross, clashes completely with the disciples' quest for position, power and achievement. If the 12 are going to follow him, and know the fullness of God, they will have to make a complete about face that leads to humility and servanthood. And the way of the cross somehow includes being able to welcome a child in their midst, which is connected to the elusive presence of God. There are deep challenges here. At the same time an amazing promise of life is asserted.

Mark is opposing the false teachers of the time who seek **power** from Christ, not the cross. Jesus's word to the 12 is a challenge to the church to consider the suffering servant as the core concept for the way of life that arises from Christ.

Jesus' disciples were caught out over their grand designs. The urge to be the greatest and to dominate over others, and its consequences, is well known. James spells it out as the cause of splits and disputes in congregations, and we see signs of it every day in the form of national conflict, and in the corporate global economy. For us greatness means being able to attract the rewards that accrue to expansions in position and power. People want power. They want to triumph over their opposition and leave a mark on society. As we have seen recently, even occasions for marking the death of significant public figures becomes tainted by high profile figures appearing to make speeches, ostensibly in sympathy, but calculated to further their own agenda. Against all this, Jesus says that true greatness is to be found through service and humility.

Jesus' tactic of using a child to make his point introduces a perilous image. The danger is that we will miss what he is really saying here because we identify with the idealised images of the child: innocent, pure, free, and captivating. It is true that in Christian tradition childhood symbolises the innocence of life before the Fall. It is true that in life children are valued for their spontaneity, their ability to act without forethought or afterthought, for their capacity to be self-contained and their (sometimes) non-aggressive behaviour. But Jesus did not reach for any of this. He placed in the midst of the disciples, and embraced before their eyes a child who, in the Graeco-Roman world, had no rights and was always under the authority of another. The child here stands for anyone who is marginalised, poor, vulnerable or subject to injustice, especially at the hands of the powerful. To self-aggrandising disciples who were competing against each other to be the first he said: your real worth will be seen in how readily you welcome lowly ones such as these.

Jesus' gesture was a prophetic parable. It underlined the reversal of values that lies at the heart of the gospel, and it stands as a sign of what the mission of the church is really about. Here the call to the church is not to imitate the child. The call is to imitate Jesus

in **welcoming the least** in his name: the child, the stranger, the senior or the sinned against, those who suffer injustice or who are robbed of dignity and life. And what Jesus calls us to is an exact reflection of the way God deals with us in him. Mark here delineates a new centre of life and source of power based entirely on Jesus, who was humiliated and crucified. And the community, which is meant to take its cue from him and demonstrate what he has done for all the world to see, is the church. It is called to allow itself to be caught up into Christ's agendas and live according to the paradigm of the cross, so that among us his power of suffering love may break down the boundaries and prejudices we create. This is the strength that will allow the church to be built into a truly inclusive community.

What would it mean for the church to take this seriously? In 1933 the National Socialist Government in Germany began to gain control over the church, and sought to have it conform to Hitler's anti-Semitic sentiments. Having already placed civil servants of Jewish descent on a different footing from others, a law was proposed designed to deny Jews, or those married to Jews, from being Ministers in the Church. Further more, it was the Government, not the church, who was to set the conditions and decide who fitted these provisions. The proposal created great disquiet in the church. Here was a government blatantly reducing the status of a group of citizens and forbidding the church to welcome them. Emergency actions followed, and this proposal had much to do with Dietrich Bonhoeffer taking the path of resistance that led to his death. What he did was part of a struggle to include the Jews as full members of society and Church, and to resist the domination of a Tyrannical state.

It is easy to consider an example so far away from us, and some years off in time. But in Australia the current renewal of the Land Rights debate based on Perth. A group, long marginalised and oppressed in this country, who have suffered unspeakable losses at the hands of our race, have been granted native title over the Metropolitan area. But now they face the vilification of the Attorney General and the about face of other politicians, which evokes the spectre of the cancellation of support once given. This has implications for their sense of place in this society, and their sense of hope for the future. If the church in Australia is going to be true to Mark it seems to have little option but to stand with the Indigenous community in protesting against the ungracious, separatist attitude of the politicians. In the same way, while immigration intake has doubled in the last decade, and at the same time opportunities to learn English have halved, the current attempt to complain about the ghetto mentality amongst some members of the Muslim community must be challenged. Far better to enlarge and extend the means of providing welcome and support which allows them to reach their full potential as citizens and thus ameliorate this unhelpful division of society into them and us.

We may think it sounds easy to welcome the lowly one, the child, but in practice it can be hard, even humiliating. There was a man who had had a hard childhood. Not withstanding this, he had made something of his life, but he had not managed to find an enduring partnership. One day he met a woman, and a relationship began and things went along well for a while. But the woman had a son from a previous relationship and while at first the man related to him well enough, there came a time when problems arose. The man had got involved deeply enough for the presence of the child to confront him with the challenge of facing a deeper side of himself. The inner child that had been wounded so long ago now demanded attention. In the end he found he could

not “welcome the child” and the relationship which held so much promise ended. Whenever we find ourselves resisting welcoming another, we are being called to face up to something in ourselves. As Australians, reconciliation with Aboriginal people will be more likely when we can honestly face the dark side of our history, formed in the childhood of our life here, and give up living with white blind folds over our eyes.

Jesus’s challenge to the disciples to welcome the child is a painful and humiliating thing to undertake. But the Gospel is, God, in the humiliation of the cross, has already welcomed us as his children. And God has promised to be with us in the form of the ones we embrace in Jesus’ name. When that happens it means our theology and worship will be more than phraseology: more than mere words. It will be a living expression of the life of God, here and now, in this neighbourhood, or wherever the church lives faithfully. If you are looking for the source of true greatness and power, this is it. Being part of this means belonging to a truly diverse community. One that has been freed to live in the reconciling love gifted to it in Christ. And I’m here to say, there is no treasure we can have that can compare with such a gift.